

# *Serglige Con Culainn: A Possible Re-interpretation*

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The story of *Serglige Con Culainn* ('The Love-Sickness of Cú Chulainn'), abbreviated as SCC from now on, is well known but a short summary will be useful.

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While waiting for Conán Cernach and Fergus mac Róich to appear for the Samhain festival, Cú Chulainn is persuaded to catch magical birds for the women of Ulster. Failing to catch one for his wife (on this occasion called Ethne Inguba) he tries to bring two birds down and fails in his shot for the first time. He falls asleep at a standing stone and is beaten to within inches of his life by two women from the Otherworld who laugh throughout. He lies in love-sickness for a year until visited by Óengus mac Aeda Abrat. He relates what happened to the Ulstermen and returns to the stone and meets one of the women, Lí Ban. She has come as a messenger from the second woman, Fann, who has been deserted by her husband Manannán mac Lir. They need Cú Chulainn's help against an enemy in the Otherworld. Cú Chulainn sends Lóeg, his charioteer, who receives a great welcome. He meets the Otherworld hero Labraid Luathlám ar Claideb. Lóeg returns to Ireland and tells all to Cú Chulainn who is strengthened so much that he can give advice to his foster-son, Lugaid Riab nDerg, on good kingship.

Lóeg goes to Emer and tells her how Cú Chulainn is; she is not pleased that no one is helping him. She visits Cú Chulainn and tells him how shamed she is that he is sick for the love of another woman. He rouses himself and meets Lí Ban who brings him to the Otherworld. He defeats the enemy, sleeps with Fann for a month and returns to Ireland. He arranges to meet Fann at Ibor Cind Tráchtá where Emer approaches with the women of Ulster armed with knives. A strange conversation follows. The conclusion is that Cú Chulainn is given a drink so that he forgets Fann and Emer's drink makes her forget her jealousy and Manannán takes Fann back and shakes his cloak between Cú Chulainn and Fann so that she never possesses him again. All is well with the world.

The text has been edited by Myles Dillon (1953) and there has been some scholarly discussion of its content. James Carney described it as 'a mere jumble of picturesque incidents adapted from earlier literature, and as a whole it has no moral to teach and no consistent underlying philosophy' (1955, 293). Tomás Ó Cathasaigh sees a triptych in the narrative consisting of the Ulster heroic past along with the Otherworld and the conditions necessary for a Golden Age in Ireland. The first is described in the beginning of the story, the second when the rival appears from the Otherworld and the third in an interlude about Lugaid Riab nDerg becoming king of Tara (Ó Cathasaigh 1994, 85-90). John Carey also

addresses the text and seeks order in its narrative (1994a, 77-84). The copy that appears in *Lebor na hUidre* is well known for having been partially erased and re-written by a scribe. This has resulted in a somewhat clumsy doubling of Lóeg's visit to the Otherworld and the use of two different names for Cú Chulainn's wife; in one section she is said to be Ethne Inguba and in others the better-known Emer who appears in many of the stories related to the hero's life.<sup>1</sup>

But a number of questions remain as to the rather strange plot and the scenes therein. It seems odd that it was necessary for Cú Chulainn to return to the Otherworld as he fulfilled this aspect of his heroic biography already in *Tochmarc Emire*. He returns a fully trained warrior and bringing with him the deadly weapon, the *ga bolga*, as a visible prize and wins Emer's hand in the process.

During two classes I held on this text, my students came to the conclusion that the story should in fact be read as a sexual analogy with the basic message being that Cú Chulainn had temporarily lost his virility. Much of what appears in this article is based on the discussion that took place with that group of students.<sup>2</sup>

Although there are few enough direct references to sexual activity it is mentioned in some early Irish texts, witness the relationship between the Dagda and the Fomorian princess in *Cath Maige Tuired* (Gray 1982, §§93-94) and the sexual allegory in *Aided Derborgaille* as shown by Ann Dooley in her paper at the First Ulster Cycle Conference (1994). There is also the very explicit conversation in the Modern Irish story of Mis and Dub Rois (Ó Cuív 1954, 330), the possible sexual allusions made by the unnamed young queen in *Fingal Rónáin* in her conversations with and about Mael Fothartaig and the animal analogy in *Loinges Mac nUislenn* (Hull 1949a, 46, 51). There have been other papers given on sexual allusion in early Irish literature during this conference as well.<sup>3</sup> Our early penitential material bans any

<sup>1</sup> This aspect of the text will not be addressed here.

<sup>2</sup> They were Fiona Beirne, Breda Boyle, Martin Coffey, Michelle Crampton, Eleanor De Eyto, Eva Delaney, David Farrell, Yvonne Hargadon, John Kelly, Pauline Kenny, Edel McGarrity, Colin McGuirk, Jennifer Murphy, Mary Murphy, Marie Murphy-Allen, Linda O'Connell, Séamus Ó Crosáin, Stephen O'Neill, Alicon Shelly, Frances Quinn, Aoife Sheridan, Mary Woods, and Dagmar Haunold. Particular thanks to Frances Quinn and Jo Mendes who was a visiting student from Boston in that year. I commented that I could not understand why the text had been erased and rewritten by whomsoever. Was what it contained so unacceptable that it had to be erased forever? I stood back in amazement, as lecturers can be privileged to witness on very unusual, extraordinary occasions, as the class entirely re-interpreted the text and suddenly the whole thesis made sense. Any mistakes in this article are mine but I would like to dedicate it to the above-mentioned students. Both Edel Bhreathnach and Anne Connors also listened to my thoughts on this.

<sup>3</sup> See Sarah Sheehan's paper in this volume.

deviant behaviour leaving only the option of heterosexual, missionary-position, conception-focused sex. But human nature does not change. The Penitentials also mention the equivalent of 'bad thoughts' and there has always been a demand for pornography and/or erotica (Bieler, 1963, 79). Perhaps some of these tales served this purpose.

It has been noted by Lowe (2000) that Cú Chulainn's body is unstable and that there is a certain fragility in his sexuality. He suffers in his own body from the famous distortion of the *riastrad*. Lowe draws attention to the incident of the women whipping him to within inches of his life in our text and his surrender to Fann ('weak') resulting in overwhelming destruction that must be quelled by being immersed in vats of cold water, a feature also mentioned in the *Táin*. He states: 'Cú Chulainn is manipulated almost arbitrarily by supernatural beings ... Cú Chulainn himself is the site of conflict and of overthrow: even as an instrument he is unstable because the forces that work through him are uncontrollable. He does not shape events so much as he is shaped by them. Nor is he an autonomous character, free from the forces at work. He is at the very heart of the issue, his body shot through with lines of power' (Lowe 2000, 119-29, 125-6). Not only that, however, but Lowe also notes that Cú Chulainn is seen as being sexually uneasy and uncertain, a pre-sexual being disturbed by women; he poses a threat to men but is threatened by women. In SCC he lies prostrate and abject for much of the central action of the text as a result of his inability to cast at the birds and the following encounters with the two women. (Lowe 2000, 128-9).

SCC is framed within the period of Samain when the Otherworld is active and there is a general instability between the two worlds. Further, in the story of the death of Cú Roí, Cú Chulainn's body is again the subject of derision when Cú Roí shoved him into the earth to his armpits, cut his hair with a sword and rubbed cow-dung into his head. Echoing his behaviour in SCC, he avoids the Ulstermen for a year (presumably in shame) until he meets some black birds and kills them. He also arranges to meet Bláthnat, wife of Cú Roí, at Samain to plan his revenge (Thurneysen 1913a, 192; Best 1905, 22). As will be seen below, two ravens also announce Cú Chulainn's arrival to the Otherworld in SCC.

Proinsias Mac Cana has drawn attention to the sexual innuendo and its relationship with the landscape and the onomastic in *Tochmarc Emire* and says: '*Tochmarc Emire* "The wooing of Emer" for example, is shot through with this awareness of the many-layered texture of onomastic allusion ...'. He maintains that Emer's reference to Cú Chulainn's travelling of her breasts is the inverse of the imagery of *Dá Chích Anann*

('The Paps of Anu') that are equated with the physical contours of the landscape and the body of the goddess (Mac Cana 1988, 339).

In SCC the problems for Cú Chulainn begin when the women see the birds. If it can be assumed that weapons are used as sexual imagery, as with the *ga bolga*, then the wanting of the women can be read as sexual desire rather than simply seeing it as the desire for the birds. We have been told that the women are divided in three in their devotion to various heroes.

*Asbert Ethne Aitencháithrech, ben Chonchobair: 'Asagussim én cechtar mo dá gúaland dind énlaithe ucut.'*

*'Asagussem uli', ol na mná, 'aní sin'.*

*'Má gabthair do neoch, is damsa cetagébthar,' ol Ethne Inguba ben Chon Culaind.*

*'Cid dogénam?' ol na mná.*

*'Ní handsa,' for Leborcham, ingen Óa 7 Adairce. 'Rigasa úaib do chuinchid Chon Culaind.'* (Dillon 1953, II.27-33)

Ethne Aitencháithrech, wife of Conchobar, said: 'I want to have one of those birds on both my shoulders.'

'We all want the same thing,' said the women.

'If they are to be captured for anyone, they should be first caught for me,' said Ethne Inguba the wife of Cú Chulainn.

'What shall we do?' asked the women.

'Not difficult,' said Leborcham, daughter of Óa and Adarc (liver and horn). 'I shall go from you to search for Cú Chulainn.'

Once again Leborcham incites the action and dissention. She speaks only once in *Longes mac nUislenn* and ensures that the lovers meet and disaster ensues. Here she goes to Cú Chulainn using the phrase *is áil do* ('desire, want')—used in *Fingal Rónáin* in a sexual context as well (Greene 1955, II. 35, 36, 113 etc.).

*Luid iarom co Coin Culaind, 7 asbert fris: 'Is áil dona mnáib ind éoin ucut úatsiu.'*

*Atetha a chlaideb do imbirt furri.*

*'Ní fogbat merdrecha Ulad a n-aill ach foraim én dóib do thabairt fornd indíu.'* (Dillon 1953, II.34-7)

She went to Cú Chulainn and said to him: 'The women want (*is áil*) those birds yonder from you.'

He seizes his sword to use it against them.

'Have the whores of Ulster nothing else but hunting birds for them to give to us today?'

Cú Chulainn seems to over-react in calling the women 'whores' but their demands may have come at a vulnerable time for him. Calling women

such names is quite unusual in these texts, another striking example appears in the aforementioned *Fingal Rónáin* when Congal calls the young queen a *dorman* ('whore') and threatens her with a horsewhip as well (Greene 1955, ll.90-99).

To return to SCC, all these women want something from Cú Chulainn and he obliges by capturing a bird for each of them with the exception of his own wife. On the defensive, he starts a row:

*'Is olc do menma,' ol Cú Chulaind fría.*

*'Ní holc,' ol Ethne, 'úair is úaim fodáiltear dóib.'* (Dillon 1953, ll.52-4)

'You are in bad humour,' Cú Chulainn said to her.

'I'm not,' Ethne said. 'It is from me that they are distributed to them.'

But Cú Chulainn cannot leave well enough alone and says to her:

*'Nábad olc do menma trá,' ol Cú Chulaind. 'Día tísat éoin Mag Murthemni nó Bóind, in dá én ba háildem díb duticfat.'* (Dillon 1953, ll.56-8)

'Do not be in bad humour,' said Cú Chulainn. 'If the birds come to Mag Murtheimne or the Boann I will catch the two most beautiful birds for you.'

Two birds return shortly afterwards and when his wife warns him that there is danger attached Cú Chulainn replies:

*'In dóig ba dom éligudsa ón?' ol Cú Chulaind. 'Gaibsi cloich isin tailm, a Loíg.'* (Dillon 1953, ll.63-4)

'Am I to be denied?' asked Cú Chulainn. 'Lóeg, put a stone in the sling.'

But he misses ... twice. He responds in despair as this is his first failure:

*'Am trúsa trá!' ol sé. 'Ó gabussa gaisced níro lá imroll mo urchur cussindíu.'*  
*Fochairt a chroisig forro co lluid tré sciath n-ete indala héoin la sodain.*  
 (Dillon 1953, ll.67-8)

'I'm a dead man!' he said. 'Since I took arms I have not missed a shot until today.'  
 He threw his javelin at them then until it went through the wing of one bird.

A similar bird-wounding scene appears in Cú Chulainn's encounter with Derborgaill and her companion in *Aided Derborgaill* where he sucks the stone from the bird that has taken human form and then gives her to Lugaid Riab nDerg as a wife because they are now related as a result of his

tasting her blood (Marstrander 1911). There is nothing overtly sexual in this meeting. Cú Chulainn also meets Derborgaill in *Tochmarc Emire* where a similar scene occurs with the hero wounding a bird that becomes an injured human (Van Hamel 1933, 62, §84). However, it is the next scene that strikes such a strange and discordant note and it conjures up images of sado-masochism. Disgraced and disgusted with himself, he storms off and falls asleep beside a standing stone. Suddenly two women appear and later it emerges that they are LÍ Ban and Fann—presumably the humanised form of the birds.

*Co n-accai in dá mnaí cucai. Indala n-aí brat úaine impe. Alaili brat corcra cóicdíabail im sude. Dolluid in ben cosin brot úane chucai, ⁊ tibid gen fris, ⁊ dobert béim dind echfhleisc dó. Dotháet alaili cucai dano, ⁊ tibid fris, ⁊ nod slaid fón alt chétina. Ocus bátar fri cíana móir oca sin .i. cechtar dé imma sech cucai béus dia búalad combo marb acht bec. Lotir úad iarom.* (Dillon 1953, ll.72-8)

He saw two women coming to him. One of them had a green cloak. The other had a purple, five-folded cloak. The woman with the green cloak came towards him and smiled at him and hit him with a horsewhip. The second woman comes to him and smiles at him and beats him in the same way. And they were a long time at that, each of them beating him after the other until he was nearly dead. They left him then.

Here the unpleasant aspect of the Otherworld intervenes resulting in the *serglige* of the title and Cú Chulainn does not or cannot speak for a year. Jacqueline Borsje has produced a book and numerous articles highlighting the topic of the terror of the Otherworld along with the shifting faces of women and their supernatural role in the literature (Borsje 1996, 2005 and 2007a). Proinsias Mac Cana has also alluded to this fact saying that the goddesses are not always seductive, they may be ugly and malevolent although their better side tends to prevail in the happy Otherworld (Mac Cana 1976, 112).

In the middle section of the text, as Cú Chulainn lies prostrate and surrounded by the nobles of Ulster, the different names given to his wife seem to be interchangeable. The text is also contradictory due to the rewriting as he is said to be unable to speak but then speaks—refusing to go to Emer at Dún Delca and insists on going instead to Téite Bric. When a strange man appears to them at the following Samain, the woman mentioned as Cú Chulainn's wife is again Ethne Inguba. The visitor from the Otherworld introduces himself as Óengus son of Áed Abrat and recites a poem referring to Cú Chulainn's sickness (*galar*) and to the cure offered by the daughters of Áed Abrat of which Fann is one (Dillon 1953, ll.99-118).

Cú Chulainn is temporarily revived by this visit and on Conchobar's advice he bravely returns to the scene of his humiliation where he meets Lí Ban again. She explains that Fann has fallen in love with him and has been deserted by her husband Manannán mac Lir. She extends an invitation to the Otherworld, to Mag Mell, from Labraid Lúathlám ar Claideb. The names themselves may contain sexual innuendo as Fann means 'weak' and Labraid's description means 'quick hand on sword'. This may indicate Labraid's heterosexual ability in contrast with Cú Chulainn who claims to be too weak for fighting (or even a reference to masturbation). Cú Chulainn says:

*'Nímtha maith éim,' ol sé, 'do chath fri firu indíu.'*

*'Bíd gar-úar sin,' or Lí Ban. 'Bia slán 7 doformastar deit a ndotesta dit nirt. Is dénta dait ar Labraid aní sin, ar is é láech as dech di ócaib domain.'*

*'Cisi airm hi tá-side? For Cú Chulaind.*

*'Itá i mMaig Mell,' ol sí. (Dillon 1953, ll.136-41)*

'I am not well enough,' he replied. 'To fight with men today.'

'It will only be a short time,' she said. 'You will be well and the strength that you lack will be increased. You must do this for Labraid because he is the best warrior in the world.'

'Where is he?' asked Cú Chulainn.

'He is in Mag Mell,' she said.

Mag Mell is of course the plain of delights or of play but Cú Chulainn sends Lóeg, his charioteer, instead. What does he find? The stock image of male delight in the Otherworld: 150 beds and 150 women in them who all welcome Lóeg (Dillon 1953, ll.164-5).<sup>4</sup> In common with similar Otherworld texts, the adventure tales in particular, here is the image of Tír na mBan ('Land of Women') that also appears in the story of Bran where the women are lined up waiting for the men's arrival. This was the distinction made by Proinsias Mac Cana between the pre-Christian and Christian visions of the Otherworld—the reference to couples having sex in the bushes and the relative sexual promiscuity of the Otherworld (Mac Cana 1976, 100-102).

Perhaps the Otherworld can be viewed as the literary sexual escape hatch/ or is it the fantasy of the clergy unwilling to go along with the asceticism of the Céile-Dé type spirituality? The 150 beds and the sumptuous images of this and other texts bring to mind a brothel with the 150 women at Lóeg's disposal alone followed by the production of the one woman, the brothel-mistress, who will interest him. Lí Ban recites a

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps even the innocuous verb *feraid* as used in the common phrase *feraid fáilte* could have sexual connotations in this context (Dillon, 1953, l.165).



number of poems in this section; all in praise of Labraid, his abilities and his forcefulness. When Lóeg returns to Cú Chulainn and tells his adventures, the hero is temporarily revitalised and the story launches into the Lugaid Riab nDerg episode omitted by many translations.

*Atraig Cú Chulainn iar sin na sudi ... 7 acallais Láeg co glé 7 ba nertiti leis a menma na scéla adfíadar dó in gilla.* (Dillon 1975, ll.230-2)

Cú Chulainn sits up then ... and spoke clearly to Lóeg and his temper was strengthened by the stories told to him by the young man.

Cú Chulainn is now able to speak and to make the wise pronouncements necessary to his foster son Lugaid Riab nDerg—endorsing his position as the future king of Temair. Lugaid sleeps in Temair on the night of his inauguration as a result.

Cú Chulainn asks Lóeg to visit Emer and to give her a message saying that women from the Otherworld (*mná sídī*) have destroyed him. Before he leaves, Lóeg recites a poem in an attempt to strengthen him and uses the phrase *laigi fri súan serglige* 'lying under the sleep of love sickness' (Dillon 1953, l.317).

Emer does not take kindly to the messenger and rounds on Lóeg saying that if it were Conchobar or Fergus or Conall Cernach who was threatened Cú Chulainn would come to their aid. She reiterates this opinion in a long poem (Dillon 1953, ll.339-86) addressing Lóeg as *A meic Ríangabra* 'O son of Ríangabar'—his father's name.<sup>5</sup> In her wisdom, Emer seems to realise that there is only one cure for Cú Chulainn and she identifies and diagnoses the problem. It is her intervention that finally galvanises him into action. But he still procrastinates according to the text as it stands, sending Lóeg on a second, duplicate journey to the Otherworld before he accepts the invitation himself.

*Táinic Emer rempi co hEmain iar sin d'innaigid Chon Culainn, 7 dessid issind imdai i mbaí Cú Chulainn 7 ro bá cá rád:*

*'Is mebul duit,' or sí, 'laigi fri bangrád, uair dogénad galar duir sírligi.'* (Dillon 1953, ll. 387-90)

Emer went to Emain after that looking for Cú Chulainn and sits on the bed where he was and said:

'You should be ashamed,' she said, 'lying there on account of the love of a woman, this constant love-sickness will make you ill.'

<sup>5</sup> There is an echo here of yet another of Cú Chulainn's infidelities that occurs in the oddly-titled *Fled Bricrenn ocus Loinges Mac nDuíl Dermait* (Hollo 2005). Both Lóeg and Lugaid Riab nDerg appear together here as well and Cú Chulainn sleeps with both Etan daughter of Ríangabar and therefore Lóeg's sister as well as Finnchaem daughter of Eochu Ronn king of the Uí Mhaine (Hollo 2005, §§9, 29-30 and 45).



She reiterates her message in a rousing poem and asks him to arise from his sleep and the peace that follows drink. David Gabriel also draws attention to the effect of Emer's words on Cú Chulainn as she casts a slur on his manhood *laigi fri bangrád* (1995, 78). Cú Chulainn then passes his hand over his face, a motif repeated on a number of occasions, makes his way to Airbre Rofhir in Conaille Muirthemne where he again meets Lí Ban. He refuses her female invitation and sends Lóeg in his place a second time. On hearing two long poems in praise of the Otherworld and its wonders, including the beautiful women who await him there, women who fascinate men—Cú Chulainn finally makes his own way there. It is now that the ravens announce his arrival, the distorted one whose coming has been foretold. When he is confronted by the enemy, he kills so viciously that Labraid 'begs him to stop the killing' and the three vats are prepared for his cooling (Dillon 1953, ll.585-99).

Fann welcomes him in two poems and after Cú Chulainn responds in similar fashion the text continues:

*Fóid Cú Chulaind iar sin lasin n-ingin 7 anais mís ina farrad. Ocus celebrad hi cind mís di, 7 atbertsi frissium:*

*'In bale,' ar sí, 'atbérasu frimsa dul it chomdail ragatsa.'* (Dillon 1953, ll.682-4)

Cú Chulainn sleeps with the girl after that and he remains a month in her company. After a month he takes his leave and she said to him:

*'Tell me,' she said, 'where I may meet you and I will be there.'*

But their relationship is not over and the agreed meeting takes place where the following scene plays out to its interesting and inevitable conclusion. They rendezvous at Ibor Cind Tráchtá and when Emer hears of this she makes knives to kill Fann. Accompanied by fifty women they approach the threesome on the beach where Lóeg and Cú Chulainn are playing chess and Fann draws their attention to the approaching women. Cú Chulainn assures Fann that she is safe and that he will protect her. Then he turns to address Emer with the words:

*'Not sechnaimsea, a ben, amal sechnas cách a chúrait'*. (Dillon 1953, l.702)

*'I avoid you woman as all avoid his yoke.'*<sup>6</sup>

He describes her knife (another sexual allusion?) as being *tím thanaidi* (frail, thin) and says that he is stronger than a woman. Emer says that he has dishonoured her by sleeping with someone else and Cú Chulainn, instead of keeping quiet, continues to praise Fann in terms of the perfect wife. Having regained his strength and his potency he seems to revel in his

<sup>6</sup> The word used here is *cárait* translated by Gantz as 'loves': the one he loves (1981, 174).

ability to satisfy two women. It is here that Emer's acknowledged wisdom comes to light (Findon, 1997 123-30). Instead of the expected female reaction she responds with a 'far away hills are green' analogy saying:

*'Bés,' ar Emer, 'nocon err in ben dia lenai. Ach chena is álaind cech nderg, is gel cach núa, is caín cach ard, is serb gach gnáth. Cáid cech n-écmais, is faill cech n-aichnid, co festar cach n-éolas.'* (Dillon 1953, ll.719-22)

'Maybe,' said Emer, 'the woman you follow is not any better. For everything red is beautiful, every new thing is bright, every height is beautiful, every usual thing is sour. Everything absent is honoured, everything known is neglected, until all knowledge may be known.'

When she continues by saying that they were happy once and could be so again, Cú Chulainn admits that she is dear to him and will be as long as she lives. On hearing this, Fann tells Cú Chulainn to leave her. Emer responds that it would be better if she were left. Fann says that as she was threatened she should be left. The story ends with Manannán intervening with a drink of forgetfulness for Emer to alleviate her jealousy and shaking a cloak between Fann and Cú Chulainn. Their connection is so strong that it takes divine intervention to separate them. Indeed, when Fann leaves with Manannán Cú Chulainn takes three leaps, usually an indication of madness, and lives for a long time in the wilderness sleeping outdoors on Slige Midlúachra.

But the scribe distances himself from the doings of the *áes síde* (people of the *síd*) and the questionable action of the story by suggesting that all that happened was simply a vision that came to Cú Chulainn. Both John Carey (1994a, 78) and Tomás Ó Cathasaigh (1994, 89) have drawn attention to the words *taibsiu aidmillti* ('disastrous vision') in the text. Ó Cathasaigh (1994, 89) goes so far as to suggest that a story title is embedded in the narrative at this point – *Conid Taibsiu Aidmillti do Choin Chulaind la hÁes Sídi sin* ('The Disastrous Vision Shown to Cú Chulainn by the Fairies').

Love-sickness occurs in other texts as well and what Cú Chulainn experienced at length was suffered by others in least two further stories – *Aislinge Óengusa* and *Tochmarc Étaíne*. In *Aislinge Óengusa*, the hero is visited by a beautiful young girl who disappears when he stretches his hand out towards her (Shaw 1934, §1). It emerges that she spends one year as a human being and the following as a bird and he is said to fall *i sergg* as a result and this is described as a *galar* (illness) (§§1-2) in which his parents, Bóann and Dagda, cannot help him. Bóann says to the Dagda that he, the hero, is suffering from *sercc écmaise* ('love in absence') (§5). Interestingly, when they find the girl at Loch Bél Dracon she is surrounded by 150

women and they are bound by silver chains. She is identified as Cáer Ibormeith and Óengus leaves with her in the shape of a bird.<sup>7</sup>

In *Tochmarc Étaíne*, the second section of the story concentrates on the relationship between Étaín and her second husband, Eochaid Airem king of Tara and Ireland, and his brother, Ailill Ánguba. Ailill is thrown into love sickness for Étaín (*a sirg*), and the physician says that there are two illnesses that he cannot cure *ida sheirce* *idu eoid* (pains of love and jealousy) but Eochaid trustingly leaves the couple together (Bergin and Best 1938, 164). Étaín coaxes Ailill back to health and the couple attempt to meet on three different occasions but Ailill cannot stay awake long enough to meet her and another man, similar to him, appears each time. On the third attempted meeting the man makes it clear that he is her first husband, Midir of Brí Léith. Thus Ailill's love-sickness is cured and Étaín's reputation remains unblemished.

But what does the term *serglige* itself mean? It is usually referred to as love sickness or wasting sickness *DIL* (s.v.) has *serglige* 'sick-bed, bed-ridden, in decline' as well as *seirgne*, (feminine *iā*-stem) 'state of being shrivelled'. There are *serc* and *serg*. *Serc* is an *ā*-stem feminine noun 'love, beloved person' and *DIL* lists the titles of tales in which it is found. But there is also *serg* an *o*-stem masculine used as a quasi-verbal noun with the meaning 'decline, wasting sickness' and 'lessening, shrinking, contracting, declining, wasting, shrivel'. This is linked with the second occurrence of the word that is quite modern and used by Keating, *serg* 'withered, wasted'. There is also the verb *sergaid* 'causes to diminish, lessens, shrivels up' and the verbal noun *sergad* 'obsolete', 'withered' (plants), 'diminishing' (wealth) and also used as a transitive verb 'cause to diminish, lessens, shrivels up'.

But equally interesting is the second element; *lige* is an *io*-stem neuter noun 'lying down, reclining in sleep', 'setting' (sun), 'prostrate as a result of violence of disease'.<sup>8</sup> Other compounds or close compounds of interest are *lige séola* 'childbirth', *luige claen is col* 'unlawful intercourse'. *Lige* can also mean 'bed, couch' and 'flat burial place'. The reference to childbirth is strikingly reminiscent of the debility that falls on the Ulstermen during the *Táin* from which Cú Chulainn is, of course, exempt.

It is possible that the scribes, with their sense of humour, are playing on both meanings of the word—Cú Chulainn suffers from erectile dysfunction due to his overwhelming love of a woman who has enchanted

<sup>7</sup> The editor says (Shaw 1934, 45) that he is distinguishing *sergg/sercc* although not distinguished in the MS. with both written *serc*.

<sup>8</sup> Indeed under *lige* *DIL* has 'to yield to' in the context of the reference to the word in the poem at l.317 of SCC.

him by her sado-masochistic sexual behaviour. The *serc/serg* of the title may then encompass both meaning. It is becoming increasingly clear that the early literature is coded and multi-layered. Were the authors attempting to impress each other? Like two chess players or the inventors of crossword puzzles are they trying to outdo each other in codes and are we still struggling to decode or decipher their messages? Early Irish literature is very theatrical and its visual and dramatic opens the space of personal imagination. Were some of these stories designed as early Irish erotica? Is this what really lies behind SCC?

### Summary

It is posited here that SCC may be read as a sexual analogy for Cú Chulainn suffering from erectile dysfunction and that his visit to the Otherworld revitalises him. Other images in the text may also be read as sexual analogies and the title of the story itself probably contains a play on the two separate words *serg* 'shrivel' and *serc* 'love'. Cú Chulainn is also portrayed in other texts as being unstable and sexually fragile. Love-sickness is also found in other stories and afflicts mainly men. The unsuitability of the material may have prompted a scribe to erase and rewrite the tale.